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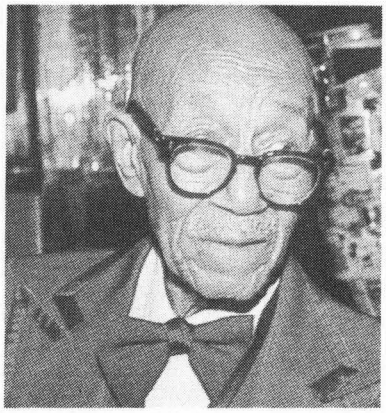
THE RAGTIMER

Eubie Blake



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To preserve classical ragtime music and to pursue such other activities as shall serve to maintain and develop interest in classical ragtime music and music related thereto.

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On Monday, Feb. 7th, Eubie Blake listened as Dick Hyman, John Arpin, Max Morath, Dick Zimmerman and others played a special birthday program for him at New York's Shubert Theatre. The fact that Eubie had to hear it through a special sound hook-up at his Brooklyn home was evidence that his health was failing. On the following Saturday, one day after the anniversary of his beloved Marion's birthday, he quietly passed away.

Every newspaper in the world erred the next day by saying Eubie had no immediate family. In fact, the entire ragtime world was and is his family. We all feel richer for having known him, for sharing his insights into the music of those who preceded Eubie, and for the link that he provided to the birth of ragtime itself.

In an issue which is devoted to our Eubie, it seemed appropriate that our usual reprint should be the music of Eubie Blake -- but we were unprepared for the treasure that John Arpin dug out of his piano bench. We invite you to try "Betty Washboard's Rag" which had never been published before this Ragtimer issue.

Eubie, we shall miss you.

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As you would expect, this issue of the Ragtimer is devoted to Eubie, beginning with the report of the New York Times that appeared the day after his death. Your Society directors hope that this issue will provide a permanent and affectionate record of Eubie's accomplishments.

© New York Times Service

NEW YORK — Five days after his 100th birthday was celebrated with gala performances of his music, Eubie Blake, the composer and pianist whose career covered a span from the ragtime era in the nineteenth century to the contemporary Broadway theatre a year ago, died Saturday at his home in Brooklyn.

Blake helped to bring the first black musical comedy to Broadway, Shuffle Along, in 1921; wrote songs that have found a permanent place in pop music, I'm Just Wild About Harry and Memories of You, and teamed with Noble Sissle in one of the top vaudeville acts of the twenties.

Despite these successes, however, Blake achieved his greatest fame in his old age when, at 86, he emerged from 23 years of retirement to become the leading personality in the rediscovery of ragtime — a bright-eyed, ebullient performer whose talents scarcely seemed to have been affected by the years.

Blake liked to remind people that his parents had been born slaves. "I'm proud of my heritage," he said. "I want everyone to know that I came from slavery and went to the top of my profession." His father, John Sumner Blake, a longshoreman who had fought in the Union Army, had been taught to write in a fine Spencerian hand by a plantation owner's daughter. His mother, Emily, a laundress, was an extremely religious woman.

James Hubert Blake was the youngest of their 11 children and the only one to survive infancy. Born in Baltimore on Feb. 7, 1883, he was 6 when he found the key to his future — an organ in a downtown department store. He was soon taking lessons from a music teacher who lived next door but, although Mrs. Blake had stipulated that no "ungodly music" would be played on their organ, her son soon discovered ragtime.

At 15, still wearing short pants, he surreptitiously got a job as a pianist in Aggie Sheldon's sporting house — $3 for a seven-day week and tips. Later, the young pianist moved on to saloons and clubs and, in 1899, the year Scott Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag was published, composed his first piano rag, Charleston Rag.

By 1915, Blake was playing piano in Joe Porter's Serenaders at River View Park in Baltimore when Noble Sissle, a singer from Indianapolis, joined the band. They began writing songs together. They took their first effort, It's All Your Fault, to Sophie Tucker, who was playing at the Maryland Theatre.

"She liked it," Blake said, "put it in her show and put us on the map."

After the First World War, Sissle and Blake went into vaudeville as the Dixie Duo. They were one of the first black acts to perform without burnt cork and were always dressed elegantly. In 1921, with another black vaudeville team, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, Sissle and Blake devised a show they hoped would put black performers into white theatres in a dignified way. Shuffle Along, which opened May 23, 1921, at the 63d Street Theatre, featured a score by Sissle and Blake that included I'm Just Wild About Harry and Love Will Find a Way. The cast included Florence Mills, Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson. In 1925, after an eight-month tour of Europe, the duo broke up.

Blake's first wife, Avis Lee, whom he had married in 1910, died in 1939. In 1945 he married Marion Gant Tyler, a onetime showgirl, who owned a house in Brooklyn that became their home. "I got the coop with the chicken," Blake liked to say. His second wife died last June, and he had no children.

A year after his remarriage, Blake retired at 63 and began studying the Schillinger method of composition at New York University. For the next 23 years, he spent most of his time either composing or transcribing in the Schillinger system songs that he had committed to memory but had never written down.

Then, at 86, he erupted out of retirement as a result of a retrospective record album, The 86 Years of Eubie Blake, that he was induced to make by John Hammond, the record producer who had discovered Billie Holiday and Count Basie and helped start Benny Goodman's band. Suddenly, he was in constant demand for concerts and appearances at colleges where he charmed audiences with his bubbling vitality.

In 1972, Blake started a record company, Eubie Blake Records, for which he was the principal performer, and continued to write and publish rags. During the 1970s, he performed at the annual Newport Jazz Festival seven times. In 1978, an adaptation of his 1921 musical, Shuffle Along, was presented in an off-Broadway theatre and was received so warmly that, expanded to draw on a wider range of his songs, it opened on Broadway in 1979 as Eubie.

In October, 1981, Blake was awarded the Medal of Freedom in a ceremony at the White House. It was at this time that his wife, Marion, who handled his business affairs, decided that, because his health had become unpredictable, they would no longer accept professional fees for his appearances although, if he were invited somewhere to be honored, he would accept if his health permitted.

On these conditions, he made his last professional appearance on Jan. 31, 1982, one week before his 99th birthday, playing his song Memories of You, at the Eubie Blake Celebration Concert at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester

The Ragtime Society was well represented at Eubie Blake's birthday party on Monday, Feb. 7, at New York City's Shubert Theatre. The Society's first president, John Fisher, was there, probably recalling August, 1967, when Eubie attended the third annual Ragtime Bash (Eubie, who stayed at John's home in Toronto, later said it was the first time he had "shared a white man's roof"). Several of the current Ragtime Society directors were also in the Shubert Theatre audience, including Society president John Arpin, an on-stage performer, Bill and Zella Connell McCrostie, Pel Bell-Smith and Betty Miquelon. Catherine Wilson, whom many will remember from last October's Bash in Toronto, played piano after the Shubert Theatre performance at St. Peter's Church where performers paid tribute to Eubie in a non-stop 24-hour birthday festival.

We asked Bill McCrostie to share the experience with Ragtimer readers. Here's what he wrote.

"Here are a few random jottings on our trip to New York for Eubie's birthday party. To set the stage, all the performers sat on stage at tables along the back and after their performance went back to their tables for the rest of the show. All the performers read one of the many telegrams and messages that came in before doing their numbers. There was no way, however, that they could read them all.

"It was a great tribute by so many people who had particular ties to Eubie and it was all hosted superbly by that old smoothie, Max Morath.

"For me, there were many highlights ... all those who came from the cast of "Eubie"... the Amherst Saxaphone Quartet... and, in a nostalgic vein, Kay Swift ...the highlight was Adelaide Hall who was tremendous. When it came to piano playing, even deducting my acknowledged bias, John Arpin was terrific. The finale, with the children's chorus coming down the aisle and up onto the stage to be joined by the entire cast was a real show-stopper.

"As you can see from the program, a number of old Ragtime friends took part but there were many more in attendance whom we had a chance to chat with at the Shubert Theatre or later on at the concert at St. Peter's Church. To run over those who I recall -- Amelia Lamb, Rudi Blesh, Gerry Vondy, Walt and Kerry Gower, Bob Seeley, Carl Seltzer, Don Burns, Susan La Marche, Dave Jasen, Bill Albright and, I'm sure, many others whom I missed.

"After the show at the Shubert, we went over to the concert at St. Peter's Church where a number of those who played at the Shubert took to the stage again. John Arpin and Catherine Wilson did a two-piano piece and then they each played a solo. Both made a great impression (one young chap from New York we met back stage afterwards said he wasn't sure of the name -- John Arpin -- but that he always thought Oscar Peterson was the best until he heard John). I also had a talk with Steve Rosenthal of the Amherst group and put in a plug for next year's Bash!

HERE WAS EUBIE'S BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE

OVERTURE..... Amherst Saxophone Quartet, Steve Radecke, Dick Hyman and friends

TAN MANHATTAN..... The Copasetics
Charles Cook
Bubba Gaines
Dick Hyman, piano

CHEVY CHASE.....John Arpin

OPHELIA RAG.....Dick Zimmerman and
Molly Kaufman, piano

IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN VAMPED BY A BROWNSKIN
Mary Louise, vocal
Emme Kemp, piano

DICTYS ON SEVENTH AVENUE
Amherst Saxophone Quartet
Salvatore Andolina
Michael D. Nascimben
Stephen Rosenthal
Harry Fackelman

CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS
Kay Swift

ON A CLEAR DAY.....Burton Lane

TELL ME PRETTY MAIDEN
"Florodora Sextet"
Nanette Gordon
Angela Cappelli
Leonora Lancellotti
Michael Halpern
Ivan Thomas
Alburtt Rhodes
Ralph Affoumado,
Musical Director

GYPSY BLUES.....Max Morath and
Kathy Morath
MELODIC RAG.....Billy Taylor
DIXIE MOON.....Dianne McIntyre
Recording by Eubie Blake
CAROLINA SHOUT.....Bill Albright
DADDY.....Lynnie Godfrey, vocal
Vicki Carter, piano
HIT THE ROAD.....William Bolcom and
Joan Morris
RANDI'S RAG.....Bob Darch
YOU GOT TO GIT THE GITTIN WHILE THE GITTIN'S GOOD
Maurice Hines, vocal
Frank Owens, piano
SPANISH VENUS.....Terry Waldo
RACHMANINOFF PRELUDE IN G MAJOR
Ruth Laredo
I'M A GREAT BIG BABY
Jeffery V. Thompson, vocal
Vicki Carter, piano
YOU'RE LUCKY TO ME..Bobby Short, piano/vocal
Beverly Peer, bass
CHARLESTON RAG.....Frank Owens
MY HANDYMAN AIN'T HANDY NO MORE
Alaina Reed, vocal
Wm. Gregg Hunter, piano
IT WAS WELL WORTH THE WHILE
I WONDER WHERE MY SWEETIE CAN BE
Dick Hyman
MEDLEY FROM "SHUFFLE ALONG" AND "BLACKBIRDS OF 1928"
Adelaide Hall, vocal
Dick Hyman, piano
WE ARE AMERICANS TOO
MEMORIES OF YOU.....AMAS Eubie Blake Children's Theatre Chorus
Michael Skloff, Musical Director
MUSICIANS: Howard Alden, guitar/banjo
Milt Hinton, bass
Ron Traxler, drums
PRODUCTION STAFF:
Production Stage Manager: Renee Lutz
Stage Manager: Nate Barnett
Production Assistants: Don Burns, Pat Earle, Tom Gordon, Ruth E. Kramer, Christy Morath, Fred Morath, Norma Powell, Oliver Shearer, Zachary Simmons, Quentin Van Wilson
COORDINATORS:
Julianne Boyd, Phoebe Jacobs, Robert Kimball and Max Morath

Mini-Bashes return!

The Ragtime Society's directors have revived a series of mini-bashes for those members close enough to get to Toronto for an evening. The next issue of the Ragtimer will have more details.

The next date: MAY 14, Saturday evening, in the Korenowsky Room of the Chez Mois Tavern, 30 Hayden Street, just southeast of Bloor and Yonge Streets. (This will be restricted to members for space reasons. Call director Betty Miquelon at 416-425-0227 if you can attend)

At the piano with Eubie Blake
An informal interview by Marian McPartland

Intro by Bob Doerschuk

KEYBOARD PLAYERS THE world over must envy Marian McPartland's broadcasting gig — her popular National Public Radio program, *Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz*, on which she shares a bench and keyboard with most of the top jazz pianists in the world (one per show, of course), exchanges a few licks and stories, and generally enjoys herself. We don't want to say it's an easy job, but it would be hard to come up with one as informal and enjoyable for hostess and guests, not to mention listeners.

The taping session on December 15, 1979, must have been especially memorable. On that day, Marian welcomed Eubie Blake, then a mere 96 years old, to the studio. With nearly a century of anecdotes and music in his mind, Blake reminisced about friends now long forgotten and others long remembered, regaled Marian with his humorous asides, sobered her and the unseen audience with descriptions of show business Jim Crowism, and dazzled all within earshot by playing songs stretching back to the early 1900s on request.

It was too good a performance to ignore, so we contacted Marian and the NPR offices and obtained their permission to reproduce the following transcript of the show. In addition, we received a collection of out-takes, portions of their conversation that didn't make it into the final version of the program; these, too, are included below. To preserve as much of the spontaneity as possible, we have only minimally edited their conversation, adding clarifications when necessary.

All we've left to your imagination is the music itself, the duets and solos that Eubie and Marian traded back and forth. You can study Marian's arrangement of Eubie's "Strange What Love Will Do" on page 61, but you'll have to take our word for it when we say both artists played some sweet sounds in the course of the interview. In fact, the show opened with Eubie spinning out a selection, and Marian adding an enthusiastic comment at the end.

— *Bob Doerschuk*

* * * *

EUBIE, THAT'S TERRIFIC! I love it! What's that song called?

"Betty Washboard's Rag." She was a friend of my wife's parents. People holler that this is hard to play, but it *can't* be that hard!

Who says it's hard?

Well, I don't want to name the fella in St. Louis who said this, but you know, he said when I played the 7th on that chord [*Blake demonstrates*] I should put the 7th up on top. But I want it on the bottom of the chord. I don't play it up there; I play it the way I want *my* music to sound.

That's good voicing. You can put the 7th anywhere you want.

It's like getting 50 cents. If you get 50 pennies, it looks like more than if you get just two quarters, but it's only 50 cents just the same.

I like how you have a lot of left hand in your solo playing. You come up with all these different figures.

Well, Willie The Lion [Smith] used to do that all the time. He thinks I got it from him, but I really got it from One-Leg Willie [Josephs]. One-Leg Willie got tired of swinging his hands [stride patterns].

Who was One-Leg Willie?

The greatest of all of us. You know, it's a shame about that fella. His people were colored, you know. His mother was working for some millionaires in Boston; they used to go to Paris in the summertime, and when they were gone, Willie would play their piano. His mother said, "Willie, why don't you stop? Come away from that piano. The white folks [might] come home unbeknowst to us, and you're playing that piano! She'll put us out!" And it happened. Something happened in Paris, and they had to come home. This guy [Josephs] is playing the piano, and he heard the key go in the door. He got up, and the man came in and said, "Wait a minute! Don't run! Keep on playing." Willie's mother is in the kitchen; she says, "Mr. So-and-so," — whatever the man's name was — "I told him about playing the piano." He says, "This boy should be in a conservatory of music." I'm glad you're giving me the chance to tell this. This is not my story. They put him in the Boston Conservatory of Music, and he finished in two and a half years instead of four. Just to show you, I did the same study, but it took four years when I did it.

Where?

I went to NYU. But at the commencement, they had five pianists. Now, he was the only Negro there. They don't say Negro anymore, but I'm gonna say it because I'm used to saying it. My people are so funny; you have to explain everything to them.

You say anything you want.

So he was in this cubicle, and nobody knows who it is. I'm trying to make this as short is possible. Willie played one of Liszt's numbers. He told me what it was; I think it was the 12th [*Hungarian Rhapsody*?], the hardest one. There was five pianists, and when Willie played they couldn't tell who it was. You don't go by the audience, because there could be plants [friends of the contestants] there. You go by the seven men, four pianists and three composers.

These are the judges?

The judges. And Willie won it. I told you,

Though world-renowned as a jazz pianist, Marian McPartland has also made her mark on the music scene as a disc jockey, film composer, journalist, adviser to arts councils, and head of her own record label, Halcyon. She was interviewed in our Jan./Feb '76 and Feb. '81 issues.

KEYBOARD is one magazine that many ragtimers enjoy but they usually do so as pianists -- not ragtimers. However, in its December issue, KEYBOARD surpassed every other publication we've seen in a planned tribute to Eubie Blake on his 100th birthday. We salute editor Tom Darter, writer Bob Doerschuk and all who were involved . We also thank the California magazine for making it possible for the Ragtimer to share some of its splendid material with you. Of course, we should know that any magazine with Max Morath on the advisory board is first-rate.

he was the same color as this piano; my father was the same color. And they said, "Mr. Josephs, you won, but we can't give it to you." Willie says, "Why?" They say, "We'll let you judge that." They never did tell him why, but everybody knew.

You know, I listened to this whole story and never even got to say hello and how nice it is of you to come down here and do this show. But before we talk anymore, would you play that pretty song you wrote for Marion [Blake's wife, who was to pass away in the summer of '82]?

[Blake performs the tune, a waltz.]

Boy, I'll bet Marion was thrilled with that. How long ago did you write that?

I think it's published now. It was about five years ago. But I wrote seven waltzes, see. Now, I'm imitating her [adopts drawn-out coquettish voice]: "Eubie?" I said, "Yeah?" "You didn't write a waltz for me." I said, "How do you know? You don't know what I'm writing when I'm downstairs and you're upstairs." See, my piano's downstairs, and when I write anything like that I go to the piano. When I write for the human voice, I don't go nowhere near the piano because my teacher taught me not to. So I said, "I'll play yours," and I played this one. She smiled and said, "I thought you would leave me out." I said, "I'm gonna leave my wife out?!"

Oh, she was just flirting. I've never seen such a pair as you. You act like you just got married.

You know, she attends to all my business. She turned down some jobs people were offering me. I don't say nothing, because she's running it. The other day she told me, "You're gonna run this business, or you're gonna let me run it." I said, "You run it." You know, I play just as hard for 10 cents as for a thousand dollars. If you say, "Come on, go to Joe Blow's house, he wants to hear you play the piano," I'll play just as hard there as anywhere else. Everyone plays for money, but I don't think about the money. I'm thinking about that audience. Are they with me?

You mentioned that you wrote songs for the voice away from the piano. Why is that?

Because at the piano you write pianistic. You write this way [Blake illustrates a syncopated line with sudden melodic twists], instead of like this [Blake plays a similar line, but with straight rhythm and more legato].

Wait a minute. How about this? [McPartland plays the theme to Blake's "Memories Of You." Blake comments, "Simple, isn't it?" At the end of the second bar, the melody leaps up to the ninth, an octave and a half above the first, and lowest, note].

That's out of range.

Not to somebody with a good voice. [Blake wrote "Memories Of You" for Minto Cato, a singer known for her extraordinary range.]

But I was going to tell you about writing for voices. *[Blake plays the melody to "Onward Christian Soldiers."]* Hear that? See how simple it is? But it's a good melody. *[He plays the same melody again, with extra grace notes and embellishments.]* See the difference?

In other words, your vocal lines shouldn't get too busy?

Yeah, but listen. *[Blake plays a heavily-attacked version of "Stardust" at a slow march tempo.]* You never hear anybody sing that, do you?

Not at that tempo.

No. I'm not knocking the guy [composer Hoagy Carmichael]. He wrote it as a piano number. It's a good melody, but not for singing.

What you're saying is that it's too rangey, that the theme covers too much of a singer's range.

Yeah. You can write as rangey as you want in opera, but I don't write no opera.

Do you practice? Do you play every day?

That's another thing. *[Blake plays a few Czerny-like drills.]* I got sick of it.

You did a lot of technical work?

Yeah. *[Blake dashes off some quick right-hand arpeggios.]* I did it in both hands until I got sick of it. But you have to do it. I'd practice for two hours and 45 minutes, and then I stop. Marion is downstairs, and suddenly she can't hear the piano: "Eubie? You got 15 more minutes. Go back and play for 15 more minutes."

She'll probably get mad at me for this, but why don't you write a tune for Margaret? That's my first name — Margaret Marian.

Write one for you? Then what will your husband say? I'm in enough trouble now! I've got seven men saying, "Hey! Who told you to write for my wife?"

He'd be very honored.

[Blake ad libs a romantic tune, then on the last bar sings the words, "I love you so."] Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm just doing an act now! Don't hold that against me, please!

I like that. I'm just remembering something you said. You studied at New York University?

Yeah. Professor Rudolf Schramm taught me the Schillinger system [a method of composition based on mathematical principles]. My first teacher was Margaret Marshall, a lady who played pipe organ in the church. But she didn't teach me how to write. I notice you frown sometimes when you're looking down [at the keyboard as Blake plays]. So does Johnny Guarnieri when he's watching me play. I finger wrong. Did you know that?

No.

Sure. I've never been taught to finger the piano. I *sting* the notes, and that's wrong.

That's a really good description, but if it works for you, it's not wrong. How did you get started writing?

The "Charleston Rag" was the first thing I ever wrote. But I couldn't write music then. I couldn't write music until 1915. A fella — I have trouble remembering names — wrote it down for me in 1899. A fella named Jesse Pickett! He was, you know, without saying the other word, a gentleman of leisure.

I've heard of ladies of leisure, but never gentlemen of leisure.

The gentlemen send the ladies out to work for them. That was Jesse Pickett. He heard me play this thing — I didn't write this. It's hard to play; watch what key it's in. *[Blake plays "The Dream Rag," the final strain modulating to* B.] Five sharps! That's the way it's written.

You can play in any key?

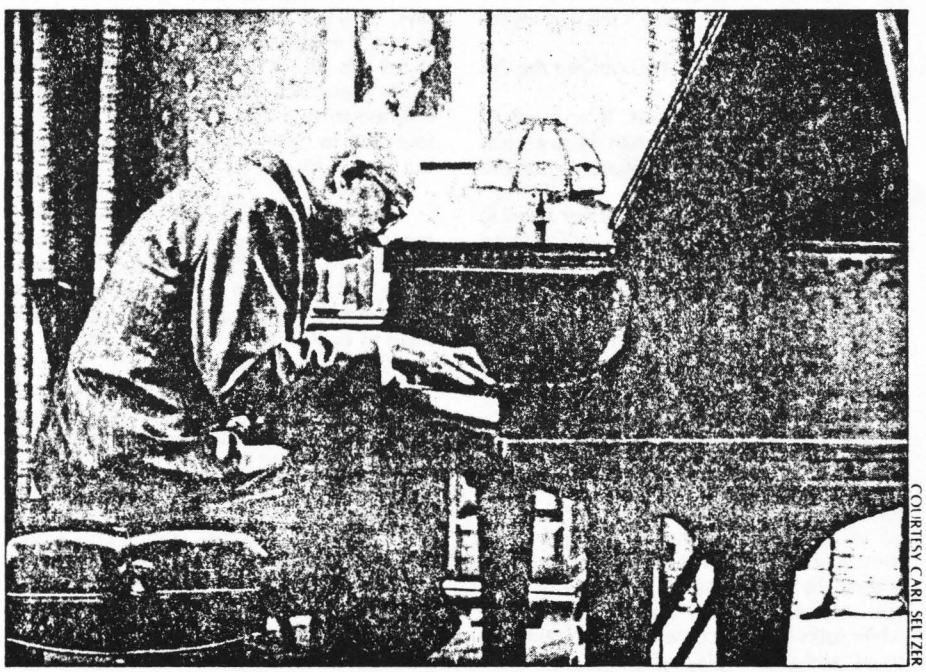
Oh, yeah. I don't care what key it is. But you know what key's been worrying me? *E* major. *[Blake plays an old tune in* E, *singing the title, "For The Last Time Call Me Sweetheart."]*

That's not one of yours.

No, that's by Al Johns. He played that for the lady — I can't think of her name. A white girl. Would you believe, they wouldn't let him come out on the stage to play with her. He's back behind the curtain, and she's out on the stage singing.

That's ridiculous. But it is a pretty song. I wish you had remembered the rest of the lyric.

That was the last song he wrote. He died



COURTESY CARL SELTZER

in Paris, and they had a great big funeral for him. I can't think of the name of the millionaire who paid for it.

Didn't Sophie Tucker do one of your songs?

Oh, yeah! [*Blake plays and sings "It's All Your Fault."*] May I say something about this? Miss Tucker was playing at the Maryland Theatre. Sissle [Noble Sissle, Blake's longtime lyricist] had more gall than I did, see? I had inhibition. He would go into a restaurant, and if they didn't feed him, he'd laugh. It would hurt me, but it wouldn't hurt him; he'd come out laughing. So he says, "We're gonna get Miss Tucker to sing our song." I said, "What? How could Miss Tucker sing our song? How are you gonna get her?" He said, "I'll go up to the Maryland Theatre." Now, I have to tell you about Miss Tucker. On the opening days of every show the woman ever did in her life, she'd stand in the wings with her dress shaking.

She was that nervous?

Yeah. She was standing there waiting for the person on before her to get through the first show. This is the year 1915. So here's the stage manager: "Hi, Noble. What are you doing?" He says, "I come to see Miss Tucker." "Oh, you know right well you can't see Miss Tucker!" I said, "I told you." But he didn't have any fear of nothing, of the races.

Good for him.

Now, I was born with it: "Don't do this, don't do that, because of the white people." See, his mother and father didn't tell him that. He went to a white college! So he says, "Will you go over and tell Miss Tucker that Sissle and Blake want to see her?" The stage manager says, "Yeah, but I tell you, she's going to raise [unintelligible]." She was just coming off after taking four or five bows; she wasn't going back onstage. He goes up to her and says, "Sissle and Blake want to see you." "*What?*" By that time Sissle walks up to her, smiling: "How do you do, Miss Tucker? I got a song I want you to sing." I played the song and Sissle sang it. Now, that was just the song; you still have to pay for the orchestration and everything, but you know what she said?"

What?

"I like the song, and I'll do it on the Thursday matinee." This was on a Monday. So we went to hear her do it in New York, at the Palace Theatre. We were sitting eight miles up in the air, way up in the balconies; they wouldn't let us sit in the floor seats. But she was the cause of Sissle and Blake writing shows for Broadway.

Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, 1921.

BETTMAN ARCHIVE

COURTESY CARL SEITZER

Eubie Blake's hands and score of "Charleston Rag," Toronto, 1960.

You did something earlier, an interpolation of the Rachmaninoff C♯ Minor Prelude, *and you were telling me some things about Rachmaninoff. Where did you hear him do "The Star-Spangled Banner?"*

In Carnegie Hall, where he made his debut in this country. He played "The Star-Spangled Banner." Anybody, a child, could play it. He didn't do it like this. [*Blake adorns the theme with rich chords.*] He played it like this. [*A simple, single-line presentation.*] No more than two or three notes. But when the man got to the middle of the song, I'm telling you, nothing but octaves. [Entertainer] Broadway Jones said to me, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself robbing these nice white people by telling them you can play the piano."

Play the top part. [*McPartland and Blake improvise a duet on "The Star-Spangled Banner."*]

He played it with no harmony in there. You see, you've got to explain this to the layman. You've got two black keys in there, and that makes it easy to do. I haven't got absolute pitch, but I asked one of the musicians there, "Was he in B♭?" He said, "Yeah." To everyone in the audience it was just another guy playing the piano. They don't know what you're doing half the time anyhow. You never saw Rachmaninoff, did you?

No. The closest I ever came is, I have his tuner, who used to travel with him.

You know who else is a good piano player? That blind boy.

Who's that?

The one from your home town.

Oh, you mean George Shearing. [*Both Shearing and McPartland were born in England, Shearing in 1919.*]

You know what I saw him do? Only musicians will understand this; you tell a layman, and it don't mean nothin'. The bass violin is playing a solo and Shearing is sitting over here talking to me. Now, he was born blind; he's never seen a piano in his life. But he says, "Pardon me, Eubie, I gotta play now." He turns around and hits the right chord just like that! But he can't see the piano!

Well, he sure can hear. He's unbelievable.

It's like when I went to Los Angeles. Everybody told me about Los Angeles before I went there, but I'll never forget that first trip there on a train. I actually saw it. But Shearing has never seen a piano, never seen anything. The most marvelous thing I've ever seen in my life.

Let's do "St. Louis Blues" as a duet.

Okay. [*Blake plays an intro, then McPartland joins in.*] You're a sucker for paying me. I'm enjoying this. I've never played with nobody like that.

You know what I want to do? You were talking about being sick of "I'm Just Wild About Harry" because you get asked to play it so many millions of times. Maybe it'd be a change if I played my version for you.

Yeah, I wish you would. Oh, boy.

[*McPartland plays a lushly harmonized ballad arrangement of "I'm Just Wild About Harry." Blake bursts into applause at the end.*]

Why didn't I think of it that way? You can play the piano!

Thank you. It's really a kick having you come down here. I think I've learned a lot more about writing and piano playing just having you on the show. You're so much fun to be around.

Thank you very, very, very much.

I hope your wife isn't going to be mad, but I just love you.

Yeah? You know, there's a woman who's going to have grandchildren next month, I think. She always puts down, "I love you" too, but I know what she means.

I love you in the good sense. Let's do "Little Gypsy Sweetheart." One more duet. All right?

[*The program closes with this final performance.*] ■

Two views of *Eubie Blake's* keyboard style

Terry Waldo & William Bolcom

By Bob Doerschuk

RAGTIME PIANO, AND the spirit of Eubie Blake, will live on for many years to come if folks like William Bolcom and Terry Waldo have anything to say about it. Both are pianists, both are close friends of Blake's, and both have explored the intricacies of Blake's piano music in their own distinctive ways.

Bolcom is the more formally trained of the two. Born in Seattle in 1938, he evidenced his gift for composing and playing by the age of four. Throughout his years of study at the University of Washington, Stanford University, and later with Darius Milhaud, he nurtured parallel interests in the classics and in popular piano music, including ragtime. On the one hand, while working with Milhaud in Paris, Bolcom involved himself with composer Pierre Boulez's Domaine Musical series, began composing an avant-garde opera, and dabbled in atonal music. And at the same time, he discovered and helped stage the revival of Scott Joplin's ragtime opera *Treemonisha*, and worked with Robert Kimball to write *Reminiscing With Sissle And Blake*, a project that brought him and Eubie into contact for the first time.

"I think Bob Kimball first took me out to Eubie's house in Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1968," Bolcom estimates. "*Stereo Review* had asked me to do an article about Eubie, and I had started playing Scott Joplin pieces in public by then, so I had an interest in the whole field of ragtime. We started doing concerts together, and we became very close and warm friends."

Waldo, too, has been playing ragtime since the '50s. Not a conservatory product — he calls himself a "bastard piano player" — he studied with five different teachers, the last one being Blake, before launching his musical career. Waldo's MA in film from Ohio State University helped him bring his ragtime message to the airwaves in 1973, when he produced a PBS series, *This Is Ragtime*, which served as a model for his book of the same title, published three years later by Hawthorne. He has recorded 14 albums, the most recent being *Vamp Til Ready*, on the Stomp Off label [547 Fairview Terrace, York, PA 17403].

Terry has also published a collection of transcribed Blake piano performances, *Sincerely, Eubie Blake* [Edward L. Marks Music]. His interest in collecting sheet music from that era led him to Eubie. "I got hold of a recording he made called 'Sounds Of Africa,' which later became the 'Charleston Rag,'" Waldo explains. "When I found out that the guy who recorded it was still alive, I wrote to Eubie and asked for a copy of the music. He sent back that piece and a whole stack of other manuscripts. They were written down in somewhat simplified versions, and a lot of the music was out of order, but I fought my way through the 'Charleston Rag' and learned how to play it after a fashion. When we finally met at the St. Louis Ragtime Festival, I played it for him, and Eubie was just thrilled that anybody would bother to learn it at that time." Years later, after Blake and Waldo both performed at a jazz festival in Nice, France, Eubie was asked by a reporter what he had most enjoyed about the festival. "Seeing my protégé Terry Waldo wipe everybody off the stage — including Eubie Blake," he replied.

COURTESY TERRY WALDO

Blake and Terry Waldo, 1974.

Blake and William Bolcom, 1972.

COURTESY WILLIAM BOLCOM

It would be hard to find two more knowledgeable authorities on the music of Eubie Blake, and luckily we were able to track both of them down for interviews in October. As it turned out, we got more than we expected — two personal portraits of a man both Bolcom and Waldo know and love, as well as a musician they respect. Their comments provide a perfect setting for those who want their first taste of Blake's keyboard music.

* * * *

BLAKE IS SAID TO represent the East Coast school of ragtime composition, as opposed to the Western style epitomized by Scott Joplin. How exactly do these styles differ?

Bolcom: Scott Joplin's music is closer to the country dance roots. It's simple, less nervous, done at a slower tempo. Joplin's roots were really those of a guy from Texarkana. He was a really straightforward country boy, never a brilliant pianist. But Eubie Blake is urban from the word go. The Harlem stride, which everybody traces from Eubie through James P. Johnson, Luckey Roberts, and Fats Waller, is a good deal more exhibitionistic; it's faster, much more orchestral, rather grand in its sweep. It reflects the fact that you'd have a much more exciting time in New York and St. Louis at the turn of the century than you would, say, in Horse's Crotch, Arkansas.

Waldo: Eubie features a lot more tenths in the left hand, which is typical of the East Coast players. The main thing about these guys is that they were show piano players, whereas Scott Joplin was very concerned about forms, trying to get the music accepted by the classical community, getting it written down and legitimized, which is very important. But Eubie Blake is full of tricks and devices. With him, the harder it is, the flashier the piano technique, the better. It's probably like the difference you would see between Mozart and Liszt.

Bolcom: Particularly with Scott Joplin, brilliance wasn't the key so much as, as he put it, an intoxication he wanted the people to feel. If you play Joplin with the right kind of feeling, there is kind of a seductive quality.

Which makes it more of a dance music.

Bolcom: Right. You wouldn't try to dance to a James P. Johnson tune, although in

things like [Johnson's] "Carolina Shout" you hear an involvement with quadrilles and country dances. This is also true of Jelly Roll Morton's "Tiger Rag," which was made directly from tunes that were available in the old French quadrilles. But when you went from Missouri to the city, you had to put on a lot of flash. Eubie was a city boy from the beginning, of course. He's always been a night person. So if there's a reason for the difference between these two styles, it would probably come down to locale more than anything else.

Given his more ornate style, one would think that Blake's pieces would be written down in greater detail than Joplin's, with all the embellishments preserved.

Bolcom: He was perfectly able to write it all out, but he didn't always do so because publishers did not want it. There are several compositions from the 1910s, like the "Fizz Water Rag," which read much simpler than he would ever play them because the lady at Woolworth's would not otherwise be able to read through the piece and sell it to her customers. To set down the composition as it would sound under his hands would put it in a Lisztian category.

Waldo: Eubie didn't write down any of that stuff. He just noted enough to remember the tune with a general outline. When I did the transcriptions for *Sincerely, Eubie Blake*, it was the first time his rags were ever written down the way he played them. What I did was take maybe five different versions of, say, the "Charleston Rag," which is probably the most difficult of his rags, and learn all the subtleties; each one had different chord inversions, different tricks, and so on.

They all had that pre-boogie woogie rolling left hand in the first strain, though.

Waldo: Oh, yeah, that's essential. But recently he began playing that down an octave, whereas on his early recording he played it closer to Middle C. He also developed a different rhythmic feel, with a laid-back rolling bass that had a kind of triplet feel where it was straight sixteenth notes back in 1921.

Did he lay back more for lack of the endurance or strength he had in the '20s?

Waldo: It wasn't that, because he had the strength. It's just a change in his interpretation. By the way, that shift from straight sixteenths to his more dotted feeling reflects the difference between jazz and ragtime, as I see it. Ragtime is divided up into sixteenth-notes with a very straight feel, which allows you to put accents on any one of those sixteenth-notes, whereas with jazz you've almost always got an underlying feeling of threes. What's interesting about Eubie's music is how it goes back and forth.

You can hear that in Sissle and Blake's orchestral version of "Baltimore Buzz," from Early Rare Recordings, Vol. 1. *At the end of each verse the band moves from dotted eighth-notes to straight eighths as a way of increasing the momentum toward the cadence.*

Waldo: You hear that a lot in his playing, which is one reason why I felt that some recent versions of his tunes have lost so much of their original impact. The musicians don't really understand how to work with the rhythm. They don't come from a tradition that teaches them how to put in all those important accents.

Bolcom: You need that absolute sense of secure rhythm, which I don't always have. I frankly think it may be in the genes. The whole African tradition in all the tribal music has been toward a kind of absoluteness, with a basic beat which you push against. I'm afraid that in a way it's a disadvantage that I'm white, because my culture doesn't deal with that same kind of absolute rhythm.

Waldo: He would talk to me a lot about maintaining a rhythm. He'd say, "The white guys tend to rush," which makes sense because most of the white guys who were playing his music and any ragtime were doing it in a concert hall. They were treating it as if it wasn't dance music, and if you're playing for dancing the worst thing in the world would be to rush.

EUBIE BLAKE: A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Eighty-Six Years Of Eubie Blake, Columbia C2S-847.

Eubie Blake & His Friends (w. vocalists Edith Wilson & I.H. Browning), Eubie Blake Music (284-A Stuyvesant Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11221), EBM-3.

Eubie Blake & His Proteges (w. pianists Jim Hession, Mike Lipskin, & Terry Waldo), Eubie Blake Music, EBM-8.

Eubie Blake Featuring Ivan Harold Browning (vocalist), Eubie Blake Music, EBM-1.

Eubie Blake Introducing Jim Hession (Blake solos on five cuts), Eubie Blake Music, EBM-6.

Eubie Blake Song Hits (w. vocalists Emme Kemp, Mary Louise, & Mable Lee), Eubie Blake Music, EBM-9.

Jazz Piano Anthology (Blake solos on one cut), Columbia, PG-32355.

Live Concert, Eubie Blake Music, EBM-5.

Rags To Classics, Eubie Blake Music, EBM-2.

Sissle & Blake: Early Rare Recordings, Vol. 1, Eubie Blake Music, EBM-4.

Sissle & Blake: Early Rare Recordings, Vol. 2, Eubie Blake Music, EBM-7.

Tenth Anniversary (Blake plays "Charleston Rag" at New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival), Flying Fish (1306 W. Schubert St., Chicago, IL 60614), 34504.

Wild About Eubie (Blake plays two solo cuts and one duo with William Bolcom; Bolcom and Joan Morris perform Blake songs on the rest of the LP), Columbia, M-34504.

Has Eubie's rhythmic flexibility had an impact on his actual piano technique?

Bolcom: I think it has contributed to his very flat-fingered style. When he wants to bring out a melody or an accent, he uses kind of a free-fall effect by taking one finger and letting his whole arm fall with that finger onto that note. It's almost a Debussyan technique, one that he's used a lot especially in recent times, when his hands began looking like those of E.T.

Waldo: His main advantage is that his hands are so big. He can grab all kinds of notes without stretching anything. I have to work real hard to get what he does.

Bolcom: And he lets the pedal bring about the legato, so that it really comes out in very strong relief.

It sounds like he was using far less pedal on the records he cut in the '20s.

Bolcom: That's possible. But remember, we're talking about a man who came out of retirement in his 80s. And actually, I would say that his piano skills got better after that, and that his use of the pedal became more judicious. Don't forget that in those old recordings a lot of performance details were lost. The compressors were so strong that the accents, a certain amount of the pedal technique, the highs and lows, and a good deal of the quality got suppressed.

Some marvelous moments do come through, though, like the banjo-like right hand in the last chorus of "Bandana Days," from Early Rare Recordings, Vol. 1.

Bolcom: Right! Now, here's a man whose technique was formed, my golly, before 1900! He told me the last time I saw him, "You know, I've been playing piano since the age of three. Every time I go someplace they want me to play the piano. I'm tired of it!" Well, I understand that, but I also know that once he's in front of an audience, he's like a fire-horse to water. You can't get him off the stage! He needs an audience terribly; it feeds him. So he does want to play. It's so much a part of his life.

On your last visit to Eubie, following his release from the hospital and the death of his wife, was he actually playing again?

Bolcom: I'll tell you about that. We saw him one Sunday in October. Here he was, dressed absolutely elegantly, looking quite fit in the back garden. I played for him, and gradually Eubie stepped to the piano. It took him a good ten minutes to get there, with his bad back. He'd played very little, I guess, since Marion died, but he began to get interested again. For some reason he got involved with the tune "On A Clear Day." He was sort of attracted to the contours; he'd never dealt with that kind of figuring in ninths. At first he was very tentative, but about the third time through the chorus it was clear that he was already intrigued with the design of the tune. That, of course, is what excited him — the way it was made. There's an intellectual side to everything he's done. Joanie [singer Joan Morris, Bolcom's wife] wanted to sing it, so he found a key that was good for her, then suddenly he began interacting, even down to the filigree between her phrases. In other words, he listens.

On his records, how much of his sophisticated accompaniment patterns is improvised?

Waldo: He wrote down the key things, then improvised from that. Once he understands what the important effects were, he might improvise a little more on the second chorus. But if he's got a neat trick, he'll make sure it's in there and written down.

One trick he seemed to favor on his early records was a constant series of rhythmic interruptions in his left-hand stride; almost every four bars there would be some kind of

Continued on page 62

syncopation or off-beat accent.

Waldo: Right. One thing that makes Eubie so interesting is that he constantly did that, throwing you off. But again, he was a showpiece piano player, as opposed to Fats Waller, who might be more concerned with maintaining that steady left hand all the time.

Bolcom: He was certainly the equal of Johnson and Waller, but quite different. In his later recordings there is a little lack of coordination, but the beat is always there, and the intent is always clear.

Waldo: You realize that these guys were playing in lieu of an orchestra. So much of Eubie's stuff involves five-note chords played rapidly in the right and left hands, maybe rolling tenths alternating with full chords in the left, and single notes and a succession of full chords in the right. But the contrast with the modern style is what interests me. Modern players don't use nearly as many devices; they don't have those rapid shifts from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, or those delicate little figures that might involve just a couple of notes, and then alternate with a fully-chorded thing. He showed me a whole bunch of that stuff.

How exactly did he work with you?

Bolcom: He would show me things and say, "One-Leg Willie Joseph did this," or "Jack the Bear did that." It was very much like in the days of the great virtuosi, when Kalkbrenner would pass along this trick, or Tausig, or Chopin. We got on the same wavelength very quickly, so it wasn't hard for me to learn, but what interested me was the background of things. It was always concrete, never theoretical for a minute. Nothing he did was awkward, except in that he could arrange his hands to make a twelfth, and I'm lucky to get a tenth on a good day. I can't even begin to tell you how much he's taught me.

Waldo: He'd show me, measure by measure on a number of pieces, how he played. I took a lot of time learning a tune from Eubie called "Spanish Venus," which Luckey Roberts wrote. Roberts died without recording or notating it, though. Eubie would sit down and play a few measures, and I would follow him. I'd say, "Like this?" He'd say, "No!" — he was always criticizing me. He also gave me a lot of advice on stage technique, like how to approach the piano, what things to say to make an audience at ease, when to smile when you're doing a trick on the piano, how to pace yourself, how to walk onstage.

What did he say about walking onstage?

Waldo: Well, the main thing is your attitude. This is true no matter what kind of music you're playing. It's like, "I'm gonna play the piano, and you're gonna listen!" He equated it to a fight. A fighter doesn't go out and say, "I don't know if I want to hit you or not." The guy's got to come in and knock the other guy dead, and it's the same thing when you play the piano. He showed me tricks about making the piano sing, as he calls it.

Such as?

Waldo: There are ways of sliding off of one note onto the next in a bluesy kind of grace note, only you do it with octaves. At the beginning of the "Charleston Rag," for instance, you hit about six notes in a chromatic run, sliding from the black note to the white one in kind of a little splash. I call that a rip. Luckey Roberts used that device quite effectively. Occasionally Eubie would do it all the way up the keyboard for three octaves. He'd show me all these tricks — that's what he would call them — and I would execute them, and then he'd yell at me [*laughs*].

How exactly would this figure break down?

Waldo: He'd run up the piano, say on a G chord, hitting the G♭ just before each G, then sliding up to the white note. He would do that in a triplet figure form too. Of course it only worked in certain keys, where you could slide from black to white.

For many years Eubie accompanied Noble Sissle and other important vocalists. Did he ever get into the subject of accompaniment with you?

Waldo: Yes, he gave me a lot of information on how to play counter-melodies to the singer and so forth. You can't play loud, but you've got to play different kinds of things and develop the taste to play things that fit with what your singer is doing. He also pointed out that it is really important to be able to play in all keys. One of Eubie's favorite pieces is a thing called "Tell Me Pretty Maiden," from *Flora Dora*. He said it used to be a big thing with all the piano players to play this in any key. So I checked him out; I said, "All right, play it in *B*," and he'd do it. He moved it into all the keys. He was always chastising me because I felt more comfortable in *C* or *F*.

BLAKE'S KEYBOARD STYLE

Many of his old accompaniments to Noble Sissle sound thoroughly thought-out, like compositions in themselves adorning the vocal theme.

Bolcom: I think that many composer-performers — and I would say that Eubie has always been first and foremost a composer, even when improvising — always have a specialty for design. In those records you're hearing a composer's mind at work, dealing not just with filigree, but with something that really adds up in some compositional way. In other words, he can't *not* compose when he performs. To him there isn't a strong separation between composition and performance.

Did you ever get advice from him on how to cope with poorly-maintained pianos?

Waldo: Eubie solved that problem by demanding to have a good instrument. You know, he and Sissle were the first black vaudeville act that didn't come onstage wearing old rags and doing dumb racist routines. He insisted on being treated with dignity. In one show he was asked to come out wearing tatters, find this old battered piano, and talk in dialect, but he refused. He said, "We go on in tuxes and we work on good instruments." They were used to working on grand pianos.

Bolcom: Eubie and Sissle were always dealing with the double standard and Jim Crow. We can sit here among the whites and trace our roots back rather leisurely, but theirs is a sense of history under duress. Black musicians are beginning to realize that they owe so much to people like Eubie Blake, that without a Eubie Blake you could not have an Anthony Braxton.

How did he feel when his career began its extraordinary revival in the late '60s?

Bolcom: The interesting thing about it is that the self-doubt never left him. People always think that you get to a certain serene state in your old age, but he's always up on his mettle. About four or five years ago we all played this roast for him, which was a singularly unhappy idea because he was the only black man there. Everybody felt nervous when they were trying to make jokes about him, so naturally they all came out racist — they weren't meant to be, but they were. It was not much fun. Bob Kimball got up, and he MC'ed very well because he understood the situation. Joan and I did several of his songs, and so forth. Then up comes Eubie. It was not his best night. He never waffled, the beat was there, but he was hitting a few notes in the cracks. He was sort of cursing his fingers: "Now, come on, fellas, play!" So afterwards he went over to Bob and said, "Bob, I didn't play very well tonight. What do you think? Do you think I'm finished?" It's a sad and funny story, but it shows you that here's a guy who still goes through crises when he can't play well. It's not insecurity. There's a very disciplined, self-critical mind back there. He knows what he wants.

Waldo: The fact that Eubie Blake happened to survive and that people had a chance to hear him is so wonderful. He probably knows more about the real history of American entertainment than anyone else. We've got something very special on our hands that we ought to be very proud of.

Betty Washboard's Rag

By Eubie Blake

Mod^te

BETTY WASHBOARD'S RAG

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"BETTY WASHBOARD STRAY"

"BETTY WASHBOARD'S RAG"

"BETTY WASHBOARD'S RAG"

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"BETTY WASHBOARD'S RAG"

"(Eubie) has that inquisitive childlike nature that we associate with Einstein, that ability to always look at things in a fresh way ..."
— **Betty Meyer**

BETTY'S WASHBOARD RAG was written by Eubie for Betty Meyer, a Rock Hill, Mo., ragtimer and washboard enthusiast who met Eubie at the 1967 Ragtime Society Bash and became a good friend. Eubie always called her "Betty Washboard" because her name at that time -- Redelsheimer -- was too bothersome to remember. (She is now married to Glenn Meyer, clarinetist with the St. Louis Ragtimers) Eubie mailed the manuscript to Betty with this inscription: "I dedicate this very respectfully to Mrs. Betty Meyer because you should see the size of her husband." Although Eubie played the tune in front of President Carter, he never recorded it. Betty Meyer once said: "I think Eubie's a genius. He has that inquisitive, childlike nature that we associate with Einstein, that ability to always look at things in a fresh way and not grow old." The Ragtimer hopes you will enjoy this keepsake of our remarkable friend, Eubie.

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I'M JUST WILD about HARRY
FOX-TROT NOVELTY SONG
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